SOME SOCIological REFLECTIONS ON DEVELOPMENT
IN THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS

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Development is a type of social change which is caused by the conscious efforts of humans to improve their material, social, cultural and spiritual life. Implicit in its philosophy is the belief that human happiness can be maximized by the greater and greater control of the material environment in the service of man. This is a concept based on the materialistic-mechanistic philosophy born of the west which has immensely progressed due to enormous development in the fields of science and technology. This philosophy is the natural outcome of the historical development of the western society, and it is well-integrated into it. It is now being accepted by societies in the non-western world, where the material, social and spiritual are well-integrated and the spiritual is a living part, in order to improve the conditions of their peoples. In these societies, the economic part of the society interacts with the non-economic part in mutually reinforcing one another. Thus to separate the economic part and to look at it from the western materialistic point of view creates more problems than it can solve.

Another important feature of the development concept is that it has a national framework. It is again a western contribution. No item of development, however laudable it may seem as regards the interests of a group for whom it is meant, can be approved and implemented if it goes contrary to the overall national interest. A third feature is that the development concept is defined, conceived and implemented by a central authority which determines the priorities as well as the areas and strategies of development, no matter how the people for whom the development programme is meant feel about their needs. All these have complicated the problems of development in the third world.

Major efforts in the programme of development have been in the direction of economic development which is to be assisted and supplemented by the introduction of such changes in the non-economic sectors of social organization as to bring them more in line with modernity. But societies are not inanimate things. They react and refuse to be interfered with indiscriminately. They have their own natures, which have to be understood if we want any modification in their material and non-material parts. One instance of such continued resistance by traditional features is the circumvention of the Indian democratic process by caste, especially in the rural areas. Despite a total commitment to the abolition of caste, it is as pervasive as before in many areas, and, further, it has also crept into new areas of our life.

Both the ecological and social framework will determine how a particular item of development will be useful or accepted in a community. There are examples from cross cultural scenes to support this contention. To take an example from the tribal world, according to the late Professor Guha, the improvement in the house structure of the Andaman Islanders led to an increase of diseases among them. Likewise, Dr. Mazumdar points out that the introduction of the values of civilization into tribal societies has resulted in the cultural disorganization of the tribal peoples of India, leading to incidences of crime, gambling, prostitution diseases, and the disappearance of tribal institutions which shaped their personality. These instances can be multiplied without number to show that the changes introduced from the outside do not always produce the desired results; on the contrary, they lead to such unintended consequences that may create more misery for the community than they were intended to remove.

It is also fairly clear, on the basis of several studies, that a community is selective in the acceptance of an alien innovation or cultural trait. For example, the Newars of Nepal, who have a very high degree of material culture, who have excelled in technological skill, craftsmanship, and metalwork, and who are traditionally known also for their skill in agriculture, still by and large shun the use of the plough. They stick to their digging hoe, although the plough is an advanced technology in comparison to the hoe. Side by side, the Chhetri would be using the plough in adjacent fields. Since they are excellent craftsmen, it cannot be said that the Newars are ignorant of the plough. The reason is that, if the Newars take to the plough, they are excommunicated by their society. But the Newars have willingly accepted the hand tractors which have been introduced from Japan. This serves to show that if any cultural item is negatively defined in a community, it is not accepted however much it may benefit the community economically. Social structure exerts its own pressure on the acceptance of an innovation from the outside.

So with regard to the acceptance or nonacceptance of a cultural trait, it is necessary for a planner or his agents to know under what social circumstances particular kinds of alien culture or innovations will be accepted by the people for whom the development scheme is to be introduced, since the planned development scheme is another name for bringing about the contact between traditional culture and the scientific technological culture borrowed from the outside.
It is therefore necessary to understand the nature of culture. The sociological-anthropological approach regards culture as an integrated whole in which the parts do not consist of a simple aggregate. They are interrelated and interdependent, forming a functional system, and the change in one part is reacted upon by the other parts and vice versa. It is because of this integration into a system, that the existence and continuity of a society is sustained. Whenever the basic existence and continuity is threatened, the cultural system reacts and develops defense mechanisms. It is this view that can explain why an innovation — be it a value, norm, behavior pattern or a material item — is not accepted by a community, however rational and beneficial it might appear.

But to say that culture is an integrated whole is not to say that its various parts are in perfect harmony. There are many stresses and strains resulting in changes in some parts or in some elements. But the tendency is towards reaching harmony, which, however, never happens in the perfect sense of the term. There are internal causes of such a change approaching changes in the demographic features of the population, innovation within the community, impermanent copying across generations, as well as between individuals with regard to their social behavior pattern, natural calamities, and clashes of class and group based interests, as Firth has pointed out. These are autogenetic changes. Given a relatively integrated community, the imbalances created in the functional system of culture are manageable, since the adaptive changes take place in the other parts of the system.

The other factor of change is external, arising from conquest or contact with an alien culture. Here the situation is different. The impact of the forces of change is quick, continuous and pervasive. This is likely to disturb the internal balance. The status and role of the individuals may become confused, leading to a disorganization of the society.

In view of the above, problems of development of the Himalayan region may be better understood if we look at them from such an angle. The communities and tribes that live over these areas are more or less independent cultural wholes with the exception of the Nepalis who have developed the caste system. These communities and tribes have been living somewhat in isolation from the mainstream of the Indian civilization on the one hand and from one another on the other, because of the difficult terrain and the absence of modern means of communication.

These communities and tribes are almost autonomous in their cultural life and are largely dependent on their natural environment for their livelihood. With the exception of the Darjeeling hills, the density of population in the mid-eastern Himalaya is small.
society is co-terminus with the existence of monastic institutions and their predominant importance in the overall society.

But the existence and continuity of the monastic institutions, and thereby of the Bhutanese culture, may not be compatible with the increased demand for skilled manpower to match the much needed pace of development. It must make a grim choice either to cut back the pace of development or to draw upon the people of Indian origin for supplies of skilled manpower with a view to not impede the regular nourishment of monks and nuns. In the long run, the inter-regional migration, which as a matter of ethnic policy is not permitted, may have to take place if Bhutan is to desire for the elimination of regional imbalances in its development. In the greater part of the country, especially in the higher hills, development has been negligible. But economic rationality may lead Bhutan to make equitable distribution of its resources to exploit the wealth of its natural environment. Even for the scientific development of agriculture and animal husbandry in the upper region, the Nepali skilled labor force may be economically necessary, as the people of Indian origin will not be ethically predisposed to migrate to the higher regions on climatic grounds. Thus the rising population of the efficient Nepali laborers may be forced to migrate to other places, where today they are not allowed, resulting in changes in the ethnic dynamics of the country while at the same time ensuring a greater pace of development.

To a certain extent, the Bhutanese ethnic manpower necessary for meeting the requirement of development could be augmented by diverting some of the labor of monks and nuns to the purpose of development. But it is the differential birthrate quality which will ultimately decide the ethnic dynamics of the country, if we assume that greater health care is available to all the communities, making the death rate uniform, and that the migration from Tibet is negligible. Therefore, the problem of development in the hill region of the Himalayas is one of preserving indigenous culture and society, while at the same time ensuring the material and social development of the region to enable the people to partake in the fruits of the modern achievements as an industrialized nation.

Another anthropological concept which we can apply with profit for development in the Himalayas is the concept of the sub-cultural world. In the Eastern Himalayas as a whole, we may take each of the ethnic groups and the tribes as an organic whole. Because of the effective functioning of each of the ethnic groups and tribes as a separate sub-cultural world, the personality development of the individuals in each of these groups may not be identical. The capacity of facing, the attitude towards change, and the eagerness to accept a particular innovation may vary between the peoples of the subcultural worlds. This is of vital importance when we introduce change. We
must have developed plans like micro-hydroelectric power schemes which can be managed by groups of families or clans.

The concept of subcultural world may be useful still in another way, especially among the Nepali people among whom caste is the basis for dividing people into hierarchic groups based on ritual consideration. If an innovation is introduced at the higher point on the social ladder, the chances of its acceptance by the community may be enhanced as it gains the prestige value of higher groups and thereby becomes an object of imitation, under the process of sanitization, by the lower castes.

Another important concept is the differentiation between form, function, and meaning. Every culture trait has a form, function and meaning. An item of culture or innovation may not be identically perceived by the individuals of different culture groups. Homer Barnett has pointed out that the form which is the overt expression of a trait, appears to take precedence over the other two qualities as determinant of change. If the form is differently perceived in the value systems of different cultures, it will be differently accepted by the prospective recipients. But if the form can be reinterpreted to conform to the patterns of meaning of the recipient culture and retain essentially its original functions, it may be accepted. Only on this basis can we explain the reinterpretations of the aboriginal gods as higher gods of the Hindus. Such syncretic process has become very handy in the spread of Christianity in Africa among the tribes. Thus an innovation may be acceptable to the culture groups of the hills — be they caste or tribe — if it can be reinterpreted to conform to their own value systems. This is the technique we may employ to overcome the traditional resistance to change in the Himalayas.

Again, the inter-ethnic conflict or inter-village conflict is another dimension of the life of the hill people. These conflicts may be reinforced and supported through mythology, assumed historical events, and village festivals and rituals, resulting in their overt expression in the day-to-day life of the inhabitants of a region. Such sentiments of conflict could be manipulated to the advantage of the developmental purpose. Thus the sociological significance of the various structural levels of cooperation and conflict is important, as these reveal the reality of the local social structure.

Given the range of change permissible by the structural functioning of a group or society, the success of the developmental efforts depends on the leadership tapped to influence the people to adopt the change. Here again the subcultural training of the administrative personnel, their moral status in the recipient community, and their image in the total traditional social hierarchy could do much to influence the people. In the hill areas, the traditional leaders still control the decision-making process of the local society.